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ASA WHITNEY: FATHER OF
PACIFIC RAILROADS

BY
NELSON D. LOOMIS

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ASA WHITNEY: FATHER OF PACIFIC RAILROADS

BY NELSON H. LOOMIS

Columbus discovered America in his efforts to find a short route to India. The same incentive spurred on to heroic effort many other intrepid explorers, and when the railroad became an assured means of transportation, the suggestions for the construction of a line across the continent were usually made with the idea of shortening the distance to China. When in his speech at St. Louis in 1844 Senator Benton predicted the carriage of commerce across the Rocky Mountains by rail, within the lifetime of full grown men then living, it was Asiatic commerce of which he spoke. For years it was generally supposed that the earnings of lines reaching to the Pacific Ocean would accrue almost entirely from Oriental traffic, and the probable revenues from local traffic were considered as incidental — by some as almost negligible. The problem still was how to shorten the journey to China and India. It was this thought which came to the mind of Asa Whitney while riding on the Liverpool and Manchester Railroad in England in 1830, and the movement of the train forced him to the conclusion that it was the railroad that must shorten the distance to the Orient. Asa Whitney was a New York merchant who had resided for a number of years in China and other eastern countries, and who was familiar with commercial conditions in that part of the world. After the idea of reducing the distance to China by utilizing the railroad had found lodgment in his mind, he again visited China and made a careful and exhaustive study of the subject. When he returned to the United States, he had become thoroughly convinced that a

railroad should be constructed from the head of navigation on Lake Michigan to the Pacific Ocean, and that when built it would enable the merchants of this country to control the trade of the East.

The thought was ever present in his mind and he gave it constant study and attention. The dream of Columbus and of the gallant explorers who followed him became the controlling factor in Asa Whitney's life. It was a mighty conception but mightier still was the resolve which came with it, that he himself would undertake the great project and by the strength and power of his own initiative carry it forward to a successful termination. The task would seem Quixotic to most people, and impracticable to others, but Asa Whitney welcomed it as a divine call to duty and, turning neither to the right nor to the left, modestly and intelligently proceeded to put his thought into action. He first studied the proposition in all its bearings and made an investigation as to the commerce then existing between the Occident and the Orient and the extent to which it might be increased by the furnishing of more adequate transportation facilities and a shorter route. The Suez Canal was not then constructed and the ships which sailed between Europe and China went around the Cape of Good Hope. The distance from London to China along the route ordinarily followed by sailing vessels was estimated at not less than 17,000 miles. The estimated distance over Whitney's route via water and rail was 11,500 miles, a saving of about 5,500 miles in its favor. His investigations and reflections developed additional reasons to support his original conclusion: build the road and the United States would not only control the trade with China, but with a small naval force would be master of the Pacific Ocean; build the road and the country upon both sides of it would be filled with industrious settlers wherever it was fit to live; build the road and the territory upon the Pacific Ocean would re-

main in the Union; fail to build it and Oregon would become a free State, controlling the trade of the Orient and exercising dominion upon the Pacific Ocean. Whitney became imbued with the enthusiasm and determination of a fanatic and no obstacle seemed to be sufficient to swerve him from his course.

His plan, roughly speaking, was to build a railroad from the head of Lake Michigan to the mouth of the Columbia River and to pay for it, as it was being constructed, by the sale of the public lands through which the railroad was to run. At that time the lines from the Atlantic Coast were projected as far west as Chicago, and there was no need of starting at a point farther east. Furthermore, there were navigable waters over which traffic could be carried all the way from New York to Chicago, and Lake Michigan was therefore the logical point for the eastern terminus of his line. The possessions of the United States upon the Pacific Ocean at that time included the present States of Oregon and Washington only; California belonged to Mexico and very naturally the mouth of the Columbia River was selected as the western terminus. Later on Seattle on the Pacific Coast and Prairie Du Chien on the Mississippi River were also agreed to as satisfactory termini for Whitney's proposed railroad.

The estimated length of the road was 2,160 miles. The lands which were to be sold to raise funds for its construction extended for a distance of thirty miles upon each side of the railroad, and were to be paid for by Whitney at the rate of ten cents per acre. Title, however, was not to pass from the Government until the actual construction of certain portions of the railroad had been completed. When ten miles were built, Whitney was to have the right to contract for the sale of the first strip of 60 miles by 5 miles, and patents were to be issued in favor of purchasers and turned over to Whitney for delivery.

With the proceeds of these sales he was to build the next section of ten miles and so on until the road was completed. One-half of the lands were to be held in reserve to pay for construction work in territory where the land was of little value. Whitney anticipated that he would be required to spend more than a million dollars before he became entitled to the proceeds of any of the public lands, and his expectation was that he would find purchasers for them among the persons employed in the construction of the railroad. It was supposed that after working approximately a year they would have earned money enough to buy a farm, upon which they would settle down and make way for other workmen, who in turn would create a market for the supplies raised by the first lot of employees, and so on to the end. One-third of the road was to be completed within nine years, one-third within six years thereafter, and the entire line was to be in use within twenty-five years from the passage of the Act of Congress.

Whitney calculated that the road would cost \$50,000,000, and that \$15,000,000 more would be needed before it could be placed upon a paying basis. The title to the property was to be vested in him, but its operation was to be subject to the supervision of the Government and the tolls were to be regulated by Congress, the idea being that the property should earn no more than would be necessary to keep it up as a going concern in good physical condition. As an illustration of the great change which has taken place in the matter of personal incomes, as well as in the financial ideals of railroad promoters, it is important to note that Mr. Whitney was to have a salary of \$4,000 per year for managing the property. The Government's interest in it was to be represented by a commissioner, and if Whitney and the commissioner could not agree, the matters in dispute were to be settled by arbitrators selected by them. A right of way two hundred feet

wide through the public lands was to be granted and the property was to be free from taxation in the Territories through which it passed, which freedom from taxation was to continue after the Territory became a State.

Whitney had no intention of making the enterprise a money-making scheme for his personal aggrandisement, his hopes and expectations in that respect, as well as generally, being stated by him as follows:

“My desire and object have been to carry out and accomplish this great work for the motives, as here and everywhere else by me declared, to give my country this great thoroughfare for all nations without the cost of one dollar; to give employment to and make comfortable and happy millions who are now destitute and starving, and to bring all the world together in free intercourse as one nation. If it is feared that the remuneration will be disproportionate to the extent and importance of the work, then I am ready to relinquish any claim that I may have for compensation, and let the people give me anything or nothing, as they please. If they will but allow me to be their instrument to accomplish this great work, it is enough; I ask no more. I am willing to have my acts scanned, but I feel that I ought not to be doubted when I say that what I have done, and what I propose to do, is not for the gain of wealth, or power, or influence, but for the great good which I am persuaded it must produce to our whole country. I have undertaken this mighty work because I know someone's whole life must be sacrificed to it.”

Having completed the details of his plan, Whitney formally called it to the attention of Congress through a memorial presented to the Senate and to the House on the 28th of January, 1845; and thereafter he was indefatigable in his efforts to have it favorably acted upon. He interviewed Congressmen and persons of influence. He explained his scheme to committees of the Senate and House, and published articles in regard to it in newspapers and

magazines. He finally concluded that the way to move Congress was to build up a strong public sentiment in favor of his plan. Accordingly he traveled all over the country addressing State legislatures and public assemblages. He met legislative bodies in the States of Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Maryland, Tennessee, Kentucky, and Indiana, and secured the passage of resolutions favorable to his plan in all of those States. He also secured favorable action from large public meetings in the cities of Cincinnati, Louisville, Terre Haute, Indianapolis, Dayton, Wheeling, and Philadelphia. He faced opposition and ridicule, and at times riotous assemblages. Strange ideas were entertained by many people as to the wisdom and practicability of a railroad across the continent, and a committee of the House, having his plan under consideration, reported that "To build a road from some place on Lake Michigan across three thousand miles of uninhabited country, over mountains the lowest pass of which was seventy-five hundred feet above the sea, was a scheme so gigantic as to be impracticable. Such a road, especially one from Lake Michigan, could be used but a part of each year. How hard it was to clear away snow from the tracks of railroads near Washington was well known to everybody. To keep open a road across plains as high as the highest peak of the Alleghanies crossed by the Cumberland road would be all but impossible."

But Whitney possessed a great fund of information upon the subject, was simple and direct in his style, and on the whole was able to convince people, not only as to the sincerity of his aims, but of the wisdom and practicability of his enterprise; and the fact that he was wealthy made it possible for him to bear the great expense incident to his widespread agitation in favor of it.

On July 31, 1846, the Committee on Public Lands in

the Senate reported a bill in favor of Whitney's project. Favorable reports were made by committees of the House and Senate in 1848. In the same year a motion for the consideration of the bill in the Senate was lost by a vote of 27 to 21.

The climax of Whitney's agitation was reached in the year 1849, when he published a book giving the facts and arguments in favor of a transcontinental railroad, which he had carefully gathered together during many years of laborious effort. It was entitled *Project for a Railroad to the Pacific*. In that year committees of both houses of Congress again made reports favorable to his enterprise, but they were not approved by Congress itself.

A controversy had arisen in the meantime as to the eastern terminus of the road. California had become a part of the public domain in 1848, and San Francisco was at once recognized on all sides as the proper place for its western terminus. But with California reaching as far south as any of the Southern States, eastern termini in the southern portion of the country became as feasible as termini farther north, and the strife became keen as to the States through which the new transcontinental line was to run. In 1853 Congress made provision for the survey of five different routes across the great plains to the Pacific Ocean, the results of which were afterwards embodied in thirteen huge volumes giving valuable detailed information as to the different routes over which it would be practicable to build and operate railroads to the Pacific Ocean.

In 1852 the Senate Committee on Post Offices and Post Roads reported a bill setting apart a portion of the public lands to enable Whitney to build his road to the Pacific Ocean, but limiting the eastern and western termini to Memphis and San Francisco and points south thereof, and reaching California by way of the Rio Del Norte. The introduction of this bill marked the end of Whitney's project and the agitation in favor of it. But

the idea had taken possession of the public mind and the discussions in favor of a railroad to the Pacific Ocean would not stop until the enterprise was an accomplished fact. Planks in favor of such a road were embodied in the platforms of both great political parties in 1860, and when the Southern States seceded in 1861, thus removing from consideration all territory in which the War was going on, and it became evident that the construction of a transcontinental railroad was necessary as a war measure, Congress passed an Act of July 1, 1862, entitled "An Act to aid in the construction of a railroad and telegraph line from the Missouri River to the Pacific Ocean, and to secure to the Government the use of the same for postal, military and other purposes", under which the Union Pacific and Central Pacific Railroads were built.

The failure of Mr. Whitney's project may be ascribed chiefly to the opinion which prevailed that the undertaking was too stupendous to entrust to a single person. But even though this objection had been overcome, it is quite certain that sectional differences as to the route of the proposed road would have proved an insuperable obstacle to Whitney's plan, just as it did to all other plans for a transcontinental line until the outbreak of the War seemed to make its construction a military necessity.

But it is erroneous to suppose that the failure to build the road under Whitney's plan deprived the country of the benefit of his years of investigation and active work. The information which he gathered and the arguments which he advanced were of immense value when the time arrived for the actual building of the road. The importance of such a road to the entire nation was brought home to all the people through his marvelous exertions, and the building of a transcontinental railroad, together with the great development of the West which accompanied it, might have been delayed many years had it not been for his efforts. It is the Asa Whitneys of the world

who challenge public attention and force the execution of national enterprises as well as the adoption of great reforms. His work is thus summarized in the report of the Committee on Roads and Canals of the House of Representatives in 1850:

“Mr. Whitney has been unremittingly engaged at his own expense since 1841, in collecting information on this subject, as well in Asia as in our own country; and we are indebted to him for the organization of the project, for the maturity of the first plan, for the large amount of practical information that is brought to bear on the subject, and for awakening public attention to its importance.”

Under the Act of July 1, 1862, it was left to the President to fix the eastern terminus of the new railroad across the continent, and he did so on the 17th day of November, 1863, by locating it upon the western boundary of Iowa opposite the city of Omaha.

As soon as possible, after the residents of Omaha heard of the action of President Lincoln, and on December 3, 1863, they gathered together to celebrate the event and to break ground for the great enterprise. The spot selected was near the Ferry landing not far above the point where the Union Pacific Shops are now located. Rev. T. B. Lemon of the Methodist Church asked the divine blessing upon the work that was about to be started. The first earth was then removed by Governor Saunders, assisted by Mayor Kennedy. Speeches were made by Mr. A. J. Poppleton (for many years the distinguished General Solicitor of the Union Pacific), and others. George Francis Train also delivered one of his characteristic talks on this occasion.

The work of construction lagged for a while, but in 1864 Congress amended the Act of 1862, so that it was possible to secure the private capital needed to construct the road, and the actual building of it proceeded in earnest. In spite of serious obstacles the work was pushed

forward with increased vigor each year, and on the 10th day of May, 1869, the Union Pacific, which had been constructed from Omaha west, and the Central Pacific, which had been built from San Francisco east, were united at Promontory in the Territory of Utah. Thus was accomplished the enterprise which had been dreamed about and talked about for so many years; and it seems proper, at this gathering of persons interested in historical research, held in the city where the great railroad for which he labored so long starts on its course to the Pacific Ocean, that we should call to mind the disinterested work of that modest, unselfish, strong-hearted and public spirited man — Asa Whitney, Father of the Pacific Railroads.

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